DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 066 688 CG 007 399

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TITLE A Model for Action Oriented Structured Groups.
PUB DATE 72
NOTE 10p.; Presented at National Convention of American Personnel and Guidance Association, March 25-30, Chicago, Illinois

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Group Experience; Groups; Individual Development; *Self Actualization; *Self Concept; *Self Evaluation

ABSTRACT

This presentation describes an experiential group design which can be employed with large, diverse populations. It is especially applicable at the university level. The design encourages self-clarification and self-confrontation on personalized issues and culminates in an individual commitment to action. Techniques such as "life space" drawings and "force field" analysis are employed in an attempt at aiding the participant in arriving at an integration of thought, feeling, and action regarding a significant personal issue. The design focuses almost entirely on the individual, using group communication and sharing toward this end. Each person's final commitment to action is the result of his or her own values and convictions. The presentation gives suggestions for using a modified version of the design for diverse populations and issues. Some of these issues include: campus, social, and political involvement; clarification of inter-racial tension areas,; and vocational decision making. (Author/WS)

ED 066688

A Model for Action Oriented Structured Groups

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CG 007 399

Presented at National Convention, American Personnel & Guidance Assoc., Chicago, Illinois, 1972.

With the current state and federal trends toward restricted financial spending in the area of education, the issue of accountability, in an attempt to justify professional existence, has become salient for counselors employed in academic settings. In addition to increasing the services which are offered to students who present at counseling offices with deficit needs, an effort is being made to extend professional services by responding to the growth needs of students in the larger academic community.

In line with the above mentioned trend, the use of group techniques has become increasingly popular because of the economics and efficiency of this approach in contacting larger numbers of students. Further, there is a growing realization that the group approach is the frequent method of choice in dealing with both deficit and growth needs. Since many of the problems and concerns of students are intricately involved with groups of people, it seems most parsimonious to deal with these concerns in a social setting.

The increased frequency of structured, highly focused experiential groups is reflective of the contemporary efforts being made by counselors to expand and broaden their services. By offering structured group programs, counselors can respond to a greater number of students with a minimal expenditure of professional man-hours. For example, once a design has been written in detail, it can be used repeatedly, given the fact that the target population or expressed purpose has not changed. To date, however, a salient problem with structured groups has been a lack of sound theoretically derived models. Models of this nature are necessary if the counseling profession is to establish programs which can effectively meet the diverse needs of different student populations. Partial resolution to this problem comes from a recently published (Hover, Levy, & Sacks, 1971) experiential group design. This design is exemplary in that it incorporates sound group process principles with a solid theoretical

base and rationale. While the 2½ hour design was originally written to assist students to cope with their personal feelings of political awareness and commitment, its versatility and adaptability should be of utmost concern to counselors. As a model, the design can easily be adapted to effectively deal with many student related issues.

At the onset, it should be noted that the paradigm under consideration has some unique features. Although some of the positive forces of group process are utilized, the design focuses on the individual and evolves naturally toward an individualized commitment to action. This process is accomplished by an effective integration of both the cognitive and the affective dimensions of the individual. This integration is in contrast to many structured experiential designs which capitalize solely on the development of intense affect and group cohesion. Theoretically, there is reason to suspect that the persistence of behavior change over time will be greater when the Hover, Levy, and Sacks paradigm is employed. At present, however, no supportive research data is available.

Summary of the Design

Life Space Drawing. Each group member is asked to make a life space drawing. In line with the purpose of the group, the area of special focus or concern should be included in the drawing (e.g., political, racial, academic decision-making, etc.). Upon completion, participants are asked to indicate the percent of the special focal area, as it relates to the total life space, as well as listing three issues of specific concern. Following this aspect of the design, dyads are formed on the basis of percentage similarity. The dyads are directed toward understanding of life space similarities with possible accompanying priority differences. Finally, the pairs join dyads who

have assigned different proportions to the special life space topic. (This part of the design should take a little over an hour.)

The initial life space drawing portion of the design is directed toward giving the subject perspective of the topic area in relationship to the total life space situation; it defines, delineates, and labels. The small groups tend to accentuate the fact that each individual is unique, in addition to encouraging ownership and sharing of the individual positions. The dyads elucidate the fact that others who are similarly concerned at a global level may have very different areas of specific concern. The quartets increase exposure to people with different degrees of global concern. Since the pairings focus on understanding, participants should be more comfortable in coming to grips with their own feelings and thoughts. Leader or design related manipulation is absent, along with subtlely applied pressure to conform to a group established norm.

Questionnaire. A questionnaire listing several possible courses of action (e.g., 30 to 40) which the student could do with regard to the area of concern is administered. All possible tactics which might be used to express degrees of action and commitment to the area of topical concern should be listed. In responding to each item, the participants are to choose from one of seven possible positions. The positions range from active involvement and behavioral endorsement to inactivity or indifference to violent opposition.

The questionnaire relates possible action behavior alternatives with the thoughts and feelings disclosed in the previous section. This instrument helps focus the individual toward what he would be willing to do.

A new questionnaire will need to be written for each topic area. Concern needs to be made to include all possible action alternatives, so as to broaden options and reduce the possibility of design related manipulation.

Force Field Analysis. After completion of the questionnaire participants are asked to place a check by those items which were marked at either extreme (e.g., marked as 1 or 7) and asked to indicate if that behavior had been demonstrated in the past year. The participants are then asked to observe congruence between the areas which were marked as important and those which were checked as having been behaviorally expressed in the past year. Each participant is instructed to do a force field analysis on a discrepant item in an attempt to resolve the conflict or dilemma. That is, the restraining and facilitating forces responsible for the inactivity are to be noted. Following the completion of the force field analysis, dyads are formed for the purpose of sharing the results.

Once the participant's thoughts and feelings have been delineated (life space drawing) and possible action alternatives presented (questionnaire), the force field analysis may well facilitate resolution of current dilemmas, as well as instigate behavior change. Undoubtedly, many participants will not have been aware of the discrepancy in their behavior. This knowledge should heighten awareness and possibly add a sense of internal control with regard to the relationship between feelings, thoughts, and behavior. Possible courses of action designed to remove restraining forces may be launched as a result of the exercise.

A significant aspect of this portion of the design is that it imparts an important skill to the participant which should easily generalize beyond the structured experience. The knowledge of how to conceptualize and resolve future dilemmas should be of prime importance to the participant. Awareness of how facilitating and restraining forces can immobilize action may be sufficient for many. If not, the participant can always do an actual force field analysis on any given future issue.

Commitment to Action. Each participant determines for himself a course of action which can be initiated in the immediate future. Small groups (e.g., four to six) are formed on the basis of expressed action similarity (i.e., usually varying from a greater to lesser action commitment). In the group setting, the participants are instructed to identify the projected action behavior, as well as noting the problems experienced in arriving at the decision, the anticipated difficulty in instigating the behavior, and the expected consequences of the endeavor.

The initial part of the total structured experience was optimally designed to focus on each individual's thoughts and feelings with regard to the given topic area, as well as encouraging a highly individualized commitment to some form of action. The use of small groups at the end of the experience allows for the optimal use of the positive aspects of groups, while minimizing some of the more traditionally burdensome and time consuming aspects. For example, since each individual comes to the group with a definitive position and course of action, the need to engage in testing behavior should be reduced. Group pressures toward conformity and cohesion should be minimal because of the projected short life span of the group. Further, the participants should have a high degree of tolerance for diversity of position as a result of the beginning exercises which focused on awareness and acceptance of individual uniqueness.

With regard to utilizing the positive aspects of group principles the issues of feedback concerning the nature of the action choice, possible modeling, and group support are present. The impact of verbally commiting, in the presence of others, to a course of action could be significant, especially when those people present share similar positions as to the basic type or extent of action.

Suggested Design Adaptations

Unfortunately, little definitive data about the success of design variations can be given. With the exception of one situation, all previous attempts at design execution were pre-maturely aborted as a result of non-design related issues. Planned projects for the use of the design have yet to be initiated. Examples of how the design could be and in some cases will be used can be given.

The only actual use of a modified version of the design on the Indiana University campus was with a population of resident hall assistants. The focus of the experience was to facilitate individual decision making and commitment with regard to job direction and definition. The experience was only one part of a weekend workshop for the staff members of a given quadrangle. The high degree of implicit and explicit resistance which followed shortly after the commencement of the experience resulted in its early termination. Much data was generated with regard to the group in question as a result of the design failure, along with admonitions for future uses of the design. Considerable tension had existed over a period of time between the various staff members. Much of this tension had been present during the weekend in question, but had not been dealt with at an overt level. (The leader of the structured exercise was unaware of this situation.) As a result of the extended group history and conflict, trust became a salient issue, resulting in participant reluctance to share personal features about themselves. The prime value of the structured design was the diagnostic purpose it served. By eliciting data, the conflicts in question were brought to the surface and could be dealt with in a constructive manner.

The problems encountered with the use of this design gives rise to questions as to its appropriateness for use with intact groups, especially if the group

struggles with a history of conflict and trust. Perhaps the required sharing of self in the initial portion of the design without an accompanying opportunity for the establishment of trust makes the design contraindicated for an intact group. Only repeated use and experimentation will answer this question.

The original planned use of the structured experiential design on the I.U. campus was for freshman students involved in orientation. The program was cancelled, however, because of reduced time and space. An entire weekend was to be allocated to an extended and adapted version of the design. The focus of the weekend was to help individual students determine the degree and direction of potential campus social and political involvement. The program was written in response to the concern that many political/social action oriented freshmen tended to experience personal frustrations and occasional academic difficulty because they over extended themselves in an effort to find appropriate organizations to which to commit. The focus of the design was to help the student determine what time he would have and would be willing to invest, as well as helping him delineate the extent and nature of his own interest as it related to the various campus organizations. It was thought that if students were more definitive about their interests, needs, and priorities with regard to campus involving issues, that they could more efficiently use and channel their energies. In addition to having a more personally productive college experience, the student would be able to accomplish more for a given organization or cause if his commitment was realistically action oriented.

Two significant variations from the basic model were planned with the freshman group. After the questionnaire portion of the design and prior to the commitment to action phase, literature identifying the various campus organizations and their stated philosophies and goals was to be disseminated

and discussed. Conceivably, a student would be unable to find an organization which met his unique needs and interests, at which point he might need to withhold decision or commit to an individual, non-organizationally derived course of action. The second point of departure from the basic paradigm came with the projected use of follow-up groups which would meet twice during the semester. Since the students would be working in small groups of 12 to 15 during the weekend, the impact of the group should be more potent than that described in the original 2½ hour design. The employment of follow-up groups was to serve a two-fold purpose. Of salient importance, was the belief that behavior changes would stabilize and solidify more effectively over time with the existence of a reference group which would serve as a reinforcer. Secondly, the subsequent meetings would allow for easier assessment of the behavioral change over time.

Plans are presently being made for the future use of the design with groups of students struggling with educational/vocational decision-making problems. A work space drawing will be utilized, in contrast to the aforementioned life space drawing. The questionnaire will evolve around behavioral investigation issues that relate to types of things which the individual would be willing to do in his pursuit to resolve his problems (e.g., willingness to talk with others, willingness to read about, willingness to write for information, willingness to take tests, etc.).

The same basic paradigm could easily be adapted for work with students who are strongly involved with issues concerning racism. Several possible designs and target populations appear feasible with this approach. For example, the concern that black students might have with regard to their relationship with other black students and/or with white students. A similar group could be designed to work with all white students who were concerned with the current

racial issue and the extent of their action based involvement. Of course, the option of having a racially mixed group could be very functional. The general focus of the design toward self-awareness, self-confrontation, and a final commitment to action suggests that this design might be very facilitative in dealing with the topic of racism.

Assessment of Program Effectiveness

No mention of design effectiveness over time was made in the Hover et. al. (1971) publication. Effectiveness was assessed by asking the participants to rate the probability of their instigating the action commitment. If the design is to have functional utility, knowledge of the degree of change (cognitive, affective, or behavioral) and its persistence over time is necessary. Perhaps the best means by which to measure this change would be via a situationally devised questionnaire; the use of standardized instruments would be nominal given the various directions of possible behavior change.

Conclusion

The structured experiential design presented is an exemplary model which incorporates sound theoretical and empirical principles of group process. Because of these facts, the basic model has the versatility and adaptability to be used with diverse populations who have grossly different needs. Hopefully, the reader will be challenged and stimulated sufficiently by the presentation of the above model that professionally oriented action behavior will follow.

References

Hover, J., Levy, B., & Sacks, S. A. Training for political awareness and commitment. Social Changes, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1971.